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ABSTRACT

A composition instructor developed a course that has moral traction, a course intended to serve as a blueprint for students, a heuristic for enlarging social consciousness and effecting social change. On the first day of class, the instructor introduces the "fundamental theme" of poverty and a schedule of assignments/activities that commence the class's journey as a "community of purpose." A discussion of social class segues into project one, an inquiry into the terms used to construct poverty as a discursive and material category. The second assignment asks students to turn their attention to mass media texts that most likely shaped their prior understanding of poverty. In the third project, students volunteer for service with an agency that helps people meet their basic needs. The last two projects (an analysis of the organization for which they worked and a formal academic research paper) encourage students to reflect on their actions and ponder steps toward short or long term solutions. These five projects encourage students to identify or hypothesize solutions and to see themselves implicated not only in the problems but also in the search for solutions and the process of social transformation. Contains 20 references; an appendix contains an overview of assignments. (RS)

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ED 420 069

Measuring Words In Actions: Writing and the Process of Social Change

Nancy L Nester

In the interest of brevity, I shall largely beg two theoretical questions One raises the issue of whether the required writing courses should be used to achieve a political end The other centers on the ethic of adding a compulsory service component to the academic curriculum As to the former, I am of the mind that despite the efforts of a department to divest a course of any political agenda, to render it neutral in form and content, the classroom will never be devoid of values (see Ohmann in Fox 43), nor should it be The mission of an institution is value-laden These values are reflected in programmatic decisions and curriculum design The instructor's values and politics resonate--to lesser or greater degree--in topics, texts, assignments, and classroom activities Students--sentient creatures that they are--easily determine the instructor's ideological bent Even those instructors who try to teach "just" writing or writing "for its own sake" (Hairston 179), those who attempt to strike a "disinterested" pose, often utilize instructional materials that convey middle class values (Bloom 654) Moreover, the attempt to separate cognitive development from moral development may be futile, as Richard W Paul suggests (255), for intelligence often finds its best expression in moral actions

I posit the same argument to answer the sharp criticism of service leveled by such voices as Chester E Finn Jr and Gregg Vanourek who liken the "mandatory voluntarism" often assigned by "graying activists" (3) to other forms of exploitation Today, I unabashedly admit that the course I will describe has moral traction, it is a course intended to serve as a blueprint for students, a heuristic for enlarging social consciousness and effecting social change My purpose is to show students how to use dialogue--oral and

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written--to achieve the common good in this wonderfully diverse, democratic society (arguments from many quarters share my view, see the work of Communitarians; also Bizzell 271).

Many compositionists have designed courses with a similar telos but vociferously differ on the means to achieve goals. Regardless of theoretical persuasion, however, most compositionists do agree that the classroom must support a dialogic process. This is the conclusion Irene Ward reaches in Literacy, Ideology, and Dialogue, her comprehensive analysis of the various pedagogical approaches to composition. The dialogic classroom becomes, then, a place where students speak, write, and listen. In addition, they reflect on and critique the various viewpoints that emerge during the process of communicating. Such activities lead to further probing. New questions often expose attitudes and assumptions concerning the unequal distribution of power and wealth. But the dialogue that Ward envisions ensuing sometimes needs to transcend the classroom and to bring student writing--process and product--into the public realm. Drawing on Paulo Freire and others, Ward adds that students must understand that: "There is a personal, subjective aspect to their knowledge but that their personal knowledge is always relational to the knowledge of others and to so-called objective knowledge about the world" (197). Ward is cautioning us, as other theorists have cautioned in the past (Ebert), that there is a material reality and sets of what are accepted as objective truths in the world of measured time and space. In this room, for example, as in the classroom, we are variously situated in terms of subjectivity, yet we would agree on the geographical specificity and purpose of our meeting. Similarly, we might agree that there are a number of social problems that

warrant the attention of all citizens in a society. Students need to be educated in the process of turning the corner on these injustices. To do so, they need to write to real audiences about issues and problems of consequence and to write with purpose: to discern, to engage, to "intervene" (Wells 339, Ward 202-203). Moreover, they need to see significant action grow out of their texts (Cushman, "civic participation" 7; Wells 338-339). But the opportunities to carry out the type of action/reflection process or praxis advocated by John Dewey (149) and Paulo Freire (186), are sometimes limited by events and circumstances. In the course I describe, the measure of our agency will be the degree to which we can work within, around, and beyond some of what may appear to be obstacles in the path of our best intentions.

On the first day of classes, I introduce the "fundamental theme" (Freire 84) of poverty and a schedule of assignments/ activities that commence our journey as a "community of purpose" (Freire 82). After discussing, briefly, our combined role in the creation of our learning environment, we begin to help one another to explore some of the constraints under which we work. First, I point out that we are working within an institution--the university--which is set in a larger social context, one we will scrutinize more closely as the semester progresses. We also examine the course in the context of the Writing Program, and we review student goals and program objectives. In addition, I establish the narrow and broad sense of the word community. I explain that learning will take place in a multitude of sites--in the classroom, the library, the volunteer center, the agencies students will serve, and the computer lab. I remind students that in order to complete projects, all members of the class must be cognizant, too, of such things as

schedules, course loads, and the availability of resources. These are some of the many constraints we must work within, around, and beyond. By committing to do so, we take the first step toward developing the resiliency needed to face the rapid change that will be the zeitgeist of the new millennium.

Next, we become more focused on self as we share concrete details about who we are, where we are, and whence we've come. The imposed self-analysis provides what may be the students' first opportunity to consciously situate themselves within a social class structure. Interestingly, as some theorists have noted, the word "class" is often missing from the discourse of academic inquiry and daily life, although class issues are implicit in analyses of race and gender. (Bloom, "Freshman Composition . . ." 657, and Shor, "Composing Class" abstract, Hennessy 32). My students begin to recognize that their socioeconomic standing, their social class, has an important influence on their perception of and response to poverty. They gradually gain a better understanding of how cultural values and assumptions shape their notions of class. All of this has consequence, for in as much as class **is** an artificial and often arbitrary construct, but one with varying material effects, we have an opportunity to re-imagine it in a way that is more just. "In problem-posing education," Freire points out, "people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (64).

The discussion of social class provides the segue into Project One (see appendix). Few students in the class admit that they speak from within the visceral experience of material poverty--though some eventually share details of intermittent acquaintance with

periods of loss or lack. Most first learn of poverty from a safe distance, as an abstract concept. Amelioration, too, is largely theoretical. The first research project, then, is an inquiry into the terms used to construct poverty as a discursive and material category. We study the way the term is defined, and we examine the statistics that establish a problem's breadth and severity. Our inquiries lead us to the library's resources, especially primary sources, and into a conversation with various experts, beginning with the librarians. As a result, our dialogue expands beyond the classroom into a larger, albeit concentric discursive circle as we take the initial step toward making "co-investigators" (Freire 87) and "co-educators" (Jarosz 87) of a number of people on the campus community. From the outset, our work is public.

The second assignment, Project Two (appendix), asks students to turn their attention to mass media texts that most likely shaped their prior understanding of poverty. Students must select a text that depicts poverty's effects. Together, we then study the semiotics of the various representations. we look at the arrangement of words and pictures; we note the images in the foreground and those in the background. We also pay special attention to types of language--connotative, picturesque, and figurative--that are meant to trigger audience response. Again, we examine explicit and implicit value systems disclosed by the texts. We expose assumptions, especially those often left unexamined, such as "Hard work will safeguard a person from poverty or help him or her to rise out of it", or "Federal aid programs indulge recipients and breed dependence." During this brief excursion into popular representations of poverty, students often locate a number of factors that cause, exacerbate, and perpetuate the conditions of poverty. I ask them to

note these in their journal We also ask important questions about the purpose of texts that are ostensibly meant to inform but which, in actuality, may be complicit in reproducing the categories

My objective, here, as in our conversation preceding the first project, is to help make opaque the ideologies, values, and class systems that were formerly transparent We may conclude, as I noted earlier, that such concepts as class and poverty are artificial and, often, arbitrary constructs--inconsistently characterized--but their temporal existence is evidenced by the material effects associated with them One method of ameliorating the negative effects of poverty is to follow the discernment and academic inquiry with action in the form of service

Kurt Spellmeyer notes that we are not beyond theory but beyond the point where we will accept theory as a substitute for activism and involvement in the world we can experience not only intellectually but also sensually His call is for greater attunement with quotidian events and people (909) In keeping with that spirit, I make service a requirement of Project Three (refer to the handout in the appendix) This project sets the student firmly on the path to transformation, both social and personal When students embark on this project, the social problem takes on a new significance It becomes tangible The importance, though, of establishing the strong theoretical base prior to the third project cannot be minimized The first two projects are necessary to create the context within which the learning through action takes place

To facilitate the process of selecting an appropriate agency with which to work, I ask the Roger Williams University's Volunteer Center to help students research and select

a site. The Volunteer Center usually makes the initial contact with the agency. Once arrangements are made, students may perform the service individually or in groups. My only stipulation is that they work with an agency that helps human beings meet their basic needs. As they work with the agency, students learn a number of important lessons, not the least of which is that the term "non-profit" is not synonymous with "unstructured." The agencies take pride in their work and often carefully orchestrate their programs. Students learn to respect this professionalism and become conscientious about making and keeping appointments and doing preliminary planning.

Class meetings during this period are opportunities for students to work in project teams to produce a newsletter or brochure that persuades other students of the value of performing community service. Since the beginning of the semester, my students and I have used an on-line discussion group to extend our conversation on the merits of service. Students may draw material for the newsletters from the texts of those messages and are encouraged to include personal narratives and creative writing. In addition, they collaborate on articles and essays. The project document is then circulated, not only to all students in the class but also to other members of the campus community. The collaborative project significantly multiplies the number of readers the students' texts will attract and expands the circumference of the dialogue, giving it greater resonance. When both the service and document are complete, the work teams stage a brief presentation to describe their experiences.

The last two projects of the semester, Four and Five, (refer to appendix) encourage students to reflect on their actions, and to ponder them as steps toward short or

long term solutions. At this point, I often need to disabuse students of the idea that the service project is an end in itself, a quick redress of the situation. Still, in on-line and in-class discussions, many students continue to argue that the solution to a problem such as hunger is to build more soup kitchens, similarly, when discussing homelessness, students tend to think building more shelters is a solution. Students should be encouraged to see these as worthy goals but stopgap measures. All the best models of service learning make this type of reflection an integral component of the course (Jarosz and Johnson-Bogart 83). Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer note that students should be warned not to think of service as "noblesse oblige (596)--a private act of kindness performed by the privileged" (596). They extend the note of caution to educators. The service without the reflective component will not help students to probe or engage social issues. "Citizenship," they write, "requires that individuals work to create, evaluate, criticize and change public institutions and programs" (597). In "Community Service and Critical Teaching," one of the most incisive examinations of the link between the ideology of service learning and composition, Bruce Herzberg argues that without a deliberate insertion of a mechanism for reflection, student thinking on service and social change will be "personal" and "highly emotional" (8). Herzberg further explains that "If our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the person for a systemic explanation (9).

Forewarned, I begin the process of reflection by asking students to first analyze the agency with which they worked. This is Project Four (appendix). Using Abraham Maslow's needs hierarchy, we classify the type of service the agency provides. Some

agencies, like the Bristol Good Neighbors, limit the scope of their service to meeting the physiological needs of clients. For example, they provide meals. Other agencies, like Lucy's Hearth, a local shelter for homeless women and children, offer a full range of services that lead to short and long term solutions. At Lucy's Hearth, women and children are housed, taught basic life skills, and provided lessons; adults are encouraged to work toward a GED and to look for employment. This agency guides the patron to self-sufficiency.

Such analysis is new and enlightening for students. Too often, they see an agency's services independent of a philosophical framework. As a result, they may take an agency to task for failing to offer a service that clearly is beyond the scope of the objectives set forth in the agency's mission statement. The analysis they complete provides the segue into the last critique.

Project Five requires that students construct the formal academic research paper. They may now, however, reach back to Project One for a relevant definition of the problem and details of its scope. In addition, their previous research and the service experience allow them to speak knowledgeably about an agency's infrastructure and funding sources. As a result, they have a fair sense of who may have the resources and power to help ameliorate a social problem.

But the process of inquiry must continue. I now urge students to consider poverty an effect and not a cause. At this point, students continue their research but begin to focus on finding root causes of poverty. Some students will be inclined to curtail their research once they have located facts and figures concerning the high divorce rate or flaws

in the educational system. A surprisingly large number will suggest that family values must be strengthened. I encourage them to look at the problem holistically. If they are pointing the finger of blame at the family, they might ask whether employees should bear some responsibility for problems families face when companies institute policies that are not "family friendly." Long work days, increased work loads, mergers, downsizing, and reductions in benefits all take a toll on families. Sometimes, parents who cannot afford day care or who are unwilling to be away from their children for extended periods must make the difficult decision to leave work. In addition, students are encouraged to consider whether all people have equal access to education, health benefits, or employment.

What challenges students most, though, are questions such as "Why is homelessness a problem?" (Herzberg 9). When I ask the question, I put the stress on the word "problem." Students seem ready to talk about the physical and psychological effects of being homeless but ill-equipped to handle an explanation of **why** a situation is categorized as a social problem? We know that most of the homeless could be housed if, presumably, everyone were to open their homes to them. But our value system, especially our emphasis on private property and self sufficiency make this scenario, a short term one at best, unlikely. The same holds true for hunger in America. There is enough food for all citizens were we so-inclined to provide it. But systems that would mandate such distribution are inevitably flawed in design, also. So students need to consider ways we can accomplish a type of distributive justice that would still preserve a free market system. Students eventually begin to focus on ways the present systems, particularly the

educational and health systems, could be improved and strengthened. I tell students that I do not expect them to provide solutions. However, I do expect a focused, carefully constructed proposal of how a program or even an attitudinal change might bring about some improvement in present conditions. I want students to see the complexity of problems and of solutions so that in the future, they might make more informed, thoughtful choices.

As you might suspect, at this point we tend to generate the most agonistic discourse of the semester, by far, for students must consider their life style, values, and standard of living. (Judging from what I have seen on the on-line discussion list to date, I suspect the discussion to be even more heated in cyberspace.) Like Susan Jarratt, I expect that we will encounter some conflict in the classroom and should not contrive ways to avoid it (106). However, my approach to conflict is closer to what Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy describe in "Teaching for Student Change: a Deweyan Alternative to Radical Pedagogy." To make his students reflect on the conflicting values/assumptions undergirding their claims, Fishman draws them into discussion and away from "win-loss confrontation" (363). Fishman and McCarthy conclude that students want to preserve amiable relations with one another in the classroom. Mindful, too, of Ward's enjoinder that the classroom be a place where mutual trust and respect are the virtues to be cultivated, I try to discourage students from focusing more on winning arguments than on gaining insights. This is possible when an instructor concentrates on "setting the conditions for doubt, ownership, and cooperative inquiry" in the tradition of Dewey (363).

The course I have described is one that guides students through a process, from discernment into action, to reflection and towards change. It can, I believe, accomplish many of the goals compositionists hope to achieve with their students. Projects One through Five encourage students to identify or hypothesize solutions and to see themselves implicated not only in the problems but also in the search for solutions and the process of social transformation.

APPENDIX

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Overview of Assignments

Project 1--Defining Poverty 10%

Texts: Reference materials including specialized dictionaries, almanacs, and abstracts WFC readings

Research tasks: Define terms such as poverty, hunger, and homelessness. What indices are used to determine that these conditions exist? What other factors (education, age, occupation, race or ethnic group, nationality, geographic location, family size) are considered? Can you detect an implicit value system in the criteria used?

Narrow your scope to an effect of poverty such as hunger or homelessness. Who is affected? How? Why?

Throughout the research process, pay specific attention to your sources. Who gathered the data or composed the text? Which institution published the findings or theories?

Objective: To compose a persuasive essay that utilizes extended definition and other forms of supportive detail. To use language to delineate an aspect of poverty in such a way that the reader clearly understands the nature of the problem and its magnitude

Skills: Selecting and evaluating information, synthesizing and classifying information, constructing the argumentative essay

Project 2--Analyzing Constructs of Poverty 10%

Texts: Print and non-print sources including television news, on-line discussion lists, newspapers, magazines, and journals. Selected readings in WFC

Objective: To compose a rhetorical analysis of the language and visuals used to construct the popular notions of poverty in America

Skills: Discerning supporting detail, connotative language, symbol, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, analyzing the strategic use of these devices to shape perception

Project 3-- Service: Altruism or Civic Responsibility 15%

Texts: Reserve articles and selected readings in WFC, Personal log

Objectives. To explore the ways in which philanthropy, charity, altruism, and civic responsibility are dimensions of modes of behavior that are intrinsic or socially conditioned. To bring about change by working locally on a global problem, to create an informative document such as a newsletter, a brochure, or pamphlet that will cultivate in your audience the desire to perform community service

Skills. Learning to work collaboratively on a specific project, planning, organizing, delegating, cooperating, meeting a non-negotiable deadline

Project 4--Analyzing and Evaluating Response 15%
Texts: Transcripts of interviews, agency documents, observations
Objectives To draw upon the service experience To further explore the agency with which you worked To analyze its methods of meeting the needs of those it serves To identify methods of insuring continued support for the agency
Skills: Conducting interviews, keeping a log, using primary sources

Project 5--Semester Project--Writing to Effect Change (Includes final presentation at Critical Writing Colloquium) 30%
Texts: Web documents, selected readings in WFC, reserve books and articles, ethnographic studies and monographs, earlier projects (papers you have written and those written by peers)
Objective To have all work culminate in this project At this point in the semester, your ideas should have crystallized In Project 1 and 2, you studied an aspect of poverty You then examined the various responses to social inequities Next, you physically acted to meliorate the problem as you continued to do primary and secondary research In the process, you observed the ways people address poverty by adhering to the wisdom of the slogan "Think globally, act locally" Now, draw on your knowledge, experience, and research and bring them to bear on a research project that addresses the problem of poverty in America and the current response to it Identify and explore root causes of poverty Theorize solutions Again, be sure to narrow this still very broad topic You may find that you can use excerpts of previous papers This will also give you an opportunity to make the suggested revisions on those papers and to refine your style
Skills Staging tasks involved in a research project, choosing a format for the research paper, integrating graphics, composing the abstract, table of contents, appendix and glossary (if necessary), sharing ideas in a conference-like setting

***Grammar and mechanics; the responsible use of borrowed material; proper documentation; the unity, coherency, and the development of paragraphs; revision strategies; and editing skills are emphasized throughout the semester.**

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Project #3: Out of the Classroom and into the Community

For several weeks, your research, writing, and discussion have deepened your understanding of poverty in America. These activities are forms of action and can help to ameliorate the problems associated with poverty. Project 3, however, requires that you--as a member of a group--take more direct action. The project involves both academic inquiry and field work. It consists of the following components:

Service
You are required to complete four hours of community service with an agency that helps people meet their basic needs. The Volunteer Center on campus is the clearing house for these agencies and will act as the liaison between you and the agency of your choice. When selecting the agency, consider your present situation. If you do not have transportation, choose an agency that is within walking distance or on a bus route. You may split the four hour period into two hour segments. This is a short term project; therefore, try to be as accommodating as possible with your schedule. Verification of service is due by April 24.

Try to make your service work relate to your long term research project.

Writing and Research
The project involves a series of writing assignments. These include weekly progress reports to be e-mailed to the CRIT202 list, a newsletter consisting of no less than 750 words of text, and a bibliography. The topic of discussion for the newsletter is community service; your audience--again--is the campus community. Draw ideas from Buckley, Grimes, Kennedy and any of the other essays or stories in Writing for Change. You should also select three new titles that would be useful to someone interested in community service or volunteer work. Use the search methods you learned in the library skills classes. List these titles in your bibliography, too.

Keep a journal. Insights, images, and observations you note in your entries might be useful to you as you compose the text for the newsletter, plan the oral presentation, and write your research paper.

Oral Presentation
The final requirement is to plan a presentation of at least twelve minutes for April 9. Each member of the group must have a speaking part. You must use visuals and prepare copies of your newsletter for each member of the class.

Meetings

Class meetings are work sessions. **We will meet in SB222 regularly**, starting on March 24. Each group should formulate a plan and assign tasks accordingly. I will meet with groups for ten to fifteen minutes during class on T and Th. We will review your progress, and I will answer questions. You are responsible, though, for the production, revision, and editing of the text of the newsletter. (I will assess its unity, coherency, and development.)

Devote the remaining hour and ten minutes of each class to writing, designing, revising, planning, and discussing your project. What you cannot finish in class, you will have to complete outside class. If you use class time wisely, you can limit the number of out of class meetings you will need to schedule.

Non-negotiables:

- The deadline (April 9)
- The number of service hours (4)
- The length of the writing project (750 words)
- The oral presentation (no less than twelve minutes; visuals and handouts necessary)

Grading Criteria

On **Thursday, March 12**, we will configure the groups. Groups will also design an evaluation sheet to be used to assess the performance of individual members of the group.

The products: the progress reports, newsletter, and bibliography will be assessed according to Writing Program Criteria for Assessment.

Project Grade

Each group project will receive one grade that is based on the grade for written work and the grade for group work (including presentation). The proportion of the grade a member earns will be determined by group assessment and by your attendance and performance at meetings. (For example, if you attend all meetings and fulfill other obligations to the group, you will earn whatever grade is assigned to the project. If you attend 75% of the meetings, you will earn 75% of the grade the project earned. Obviously, it is in your best interest to attend meetings and complete work.)

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